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ABSTRACT

All changes in educational practice are based on the assumption that it is possible experimentally or operationally to determine with accuracy which educational method is best. Yet experience suggests this assumption is doubtful. In almost every new educational experiment, the initial results are positive. In later stages, after the change is mandated and enthusiasm dies, measured results decline. This is partly because of the Hawthorne Effect (that is, the act of experimenting with any new program results temporarily in better performance). It is furthermore impossible to measure with true accuracy the results of educational change programs. The only conclusion that can be made from research concerning educational change is that people have the most success with programs they believe in. Therefore an administrator must (1) be sure to have a high quality staff, (2) expose the staff to new promising programs, (3) let staff choose their own program, (4) give support to staff programs, (5) be less concerned with conformity in method, and (6) be prepared for programs to continue to change. The potential of organizational members ought to be maximized by having them informed, involved, and carrying out programs of their own. (Author/JM)

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THE EVEN BIGGER PICTURE--A DISSIDENT VIEW OF THE CHANGE PROCESS

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The world, as Robert Oppenheimer remarked, alters as we walk in it. We are beyond debating the inevitability of change since most who observe society today agree that it is restating the obvious. One can review the last centuries, the last fifty years, the last decade, the last year, or even the last twenty-four hours and find movement, process, or alteration in almost every aspect of existence.

The changes in the physical world are easy to see and are becoming so commonplace we have almost learned to live with them. A newspaper reporter in speaking of a wondrous machine for moving rockets to the launching pad casually indicated that it is something like the Yankee Stadium sliding over to pick up the United Nations building in order to deposit it in Central Park. The changes in human relationships are often less easy to see and far more difficult to accept. The Western world is only reluctantly learning to live with the emerging nations in Africa and Asia and to realize that economic control must at the very least be shared with those who have oil. In the United States progress toward better race relations has been more deliberate than speedy.

The acceptance of the existence of continual change does not, however, necessarily imply that change is progress. One may, as did

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Herbert Spencer and August Comte in the nineteenth century, see society in the process of evolution which they believed would inevitably result in a world more devoted to the protection of human rights. One may, however, agree with Oswald Spengler who described changes as a series of waves, each civilization having its turn at the crest only to be replaced by another which was not necessarily superior. Indeed our present Proposition 13 style fiscal conservatism declares that we have not progressed at all but need to return to an earlier and simpler time.

In education, also, change is the order of our day. Thus it has been in the history of American education and thus, apparently, it will continue to be in the foreseeable future. Curriculum, philosophy, goals, organization--all are in a state of flux responding to economic pressure, national interest, political maneuvering, or philosophic retrenchment. Some change is to the new and untried and some a return to earlier practice in more modern garb. The thoughtful student of the schools certainly has reason to ponder the essential nature of such ceaseless turmoil.[1]

So much for the setting of the stage and now to the dissident view promised in the title. When any change in educational practice is proposed, four related assumptions are made:

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[1]Some of this material in a different form originally appeared in Howard B. Holt, "The Educational Uses of Change," Phi Delta Kappan, XLVI (December, 1964), 185-188.

1. There is a problem.
2. One method of handling that problem is better than any other.
3. It is possible experimentally or operationally to determine with accuracy which method is best.
4. Upon making that determination, the superior method should be put into general practice by law or policy.

It must be admitted that the logic of these assumptions appears reasonable. Our scientific heritage would indicate most clearly that this is so; it is, after all, the method of the laboratory. Painstaking experimentation, testing, examining, and measuring will ultimately reveal that which is superior and provide the basis for new and improved practices.

At the outset, the first assumption can be accepted since we do have problems. We can also accept the second since rationality demands that we go along with at least the theoretical notion of qualitative differences in educational practice. When we get to the third, there is reason to raise serious doubts. It is these doubts that form the basis for a divergent view.

An examination of the history of changes in educational practice tend to yield a consistent picture. In almost every instance of a well-planned, carefully executed experiment or field trial of a new idea, the initial results are positive. If it is a 45-15, year round school, parents, teachers and students are uniformly enthusiastic and measured academic progress is at least as good, frequently better, than the usual. If it is

SMSG mathematics, BSCS biology or PSSC physics we can expect that budding scientists are flowering all over the place. If it is MBO or PPBS, administrative results are strikingly better than ever before. In this brief paper it is not possible to examine each of these in detail, but the pattern endlessly repeats itself.

The next steps in the pattern have also been inevitable. Whereas the initial trials are usually done by missionaries or by those who have become born again converts to the new methodology, in later stages the new becomes the required and by law or policy, everyone in a school, a school district or even an entire state must conform. Almost without exception, when this stage is reached, enthusiasm for the project declines and measured results regress toward and even below the mean. If you review the programs mentioned above, and a host of others that we have dealt with in the past decade or two, how many are still alive and well and producing results following wide application?

It is necessary to seek reasons for this pattern of early success followed by decidely mixed results in educational experimentation if any rationale can be developed for the uses of change. The first of these is undoubtedly contained in the Hawthorne Effect. The act of undertaking a program perceived by its participants as a superior one markedly affects results. This, it may be argued, could even be true if the new programs were demonstrably inferior to previous practice. Military

commanders hold that a poor battle plan vigorously carried forward has a greater chance of success than a good one indifferently pursued. Hence it may be reasonable to suggest that enthusiastic experimentation so clouds the measurement of learning that the exportability of a particular educational plan is in serious question. It must also be pointed out that the act of experimenting does, after all, result in better performance and this may be the heart of the matter.

A second reason for the performance pattern in educational change may lie in the persisting problem of measurement. We cannot describe changes in human behavior with anything approaching the precision of the exact sciences, especially in education since we have not completely agreed as a society on the nature of the changes to be produced. We cannot, in other words, run lives through with one set of circumstances, then reverse the film, change the method of teaching reading and run it through again to observe results.

It is necessary, therefore, to reject the assumption that it is possible with accuracy to determine which of several alternative solutions to a problem is best. Since this assumption must be rejected, the fourth--that the new method must be mandated to all--is also in serious doubt.

If we must reject these two crucial assumptions about educational change, where does that leave us? Is it true then that teachers or administrators may do anything in any fashion so long as they believe

in what they are doing? Does it mean that since research has demonstrated so little, no more should be attempted? Should there be no effort to generate change since we are unsure of results? Should administrators simply manage whatever is currently in use? Logic requires the rejection of these assumptions as well.

If it is true that people do best what they perceive to be best, perhaps it is possible to lay down some operating procedures for administrators as follows:

1. Start with good people. If you don't have them, get them or make the ones you have as effective as possible.

2. See to it that the entire staff has every possible opportunity to examine the worth of their own programs and to be exposed to new ideas. Staff members must be supplied with or encouraged to gather materials describing promising practices, sent to observe other programs through intervisitation, and exposed to "missionaries" in their fields.

3. Be prepared to accept a staff decision to embark on a program as opposed to riding a hobby horse of his/her own.

4. Give support to the new idea in terms of facilities, money, staff resources. This is the price tag. One of the qualities required in the successful administrator is the ability to locate support.

5. Be less concerned with conformity in method than with obtaining results through the efforts of a professional staff operating in ways that make sense to them. It is admittedly difficult to see a good program operating in one segment of the organization you are responsible for and to resist the temptation to require the same of everyone.

6. Be prepared to change again when the staff comes to you and says, after a period of time, that they don't think what they are

doing is effective and would like to change again, possibly even back to the original program.

The dissident proposal herein contained then is to drop the notion that the one best plan should be sought out, verified experimentally, and then mandated across an organization. In its stead, maximize the potential in the members of an organization by having them informed, involved, and carrying out programs of their own choosing. It is worth a try since we have not made as much progress as we might wish with what we have been doing. It has been said that if you are failing, might as well fail at something new. To a degree our ventures into educational change have been a failure--perhaps what we need is not a new program but a new philosophy.